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Article

Masculinity, Intimacy, and Mourning: A Father's Memoir of His Son Killed in Action in World War II

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Abstract: Emotional restraint was the norm for the bereaved during and after the Second World War. Displays of individual grief were discouraged, and overshadowed by a wider concern for mass bereavement. There is limited archival evidence of the suffering that fathers of sons killed in action endured. This article draws upon and analyses a powerful memoir written by my grandfather, lamenting the death of his only son killed in action near the end of the War. While most men contained their emotions in such circumstances, this extended lament expresses a range of deep feelings: Love and care for the departed son, tenderness towards other family members, guilt at sending his son away to boarding school, loss of faith in (Christian) religion, and a sense of worthlessness and personal failure. Of particular interest is the impact of geographical distance over which this narrative is played out, and what it reveals about the experience of one white British middle-class family living overseas, but strongly interconnected with ‘home’ (and specifically Scotland). It also documents the pain of prolonged absence as a result of war; often boys sent ‘home’ to board were separated from their parents for much of their childhood, and were forced to ‘become men’—but not as their parents had envisaged. The article concludes by exploring the implications of this private memoir and what it reveals about memoir, masculinity, and subjectivity; gender and grieving; connections with ‘home’; and constructing meaning after trauma.

Keywords: fatherhood; bereavement; trauma; masculinity; gender; World War II; memoir

1. Introduction: Motivation and Methodologies

Emotional restraint was the norm for the bereaved during and after the Second World War. Displays of individual grief were discouraged and overshadowed by a wider concern for mass bereavement (Jalland 2010). There is limited evidence of the suffering that fathers of sons killed in action endured, perhaps unsurprising given the official repudiation of displays of public grief, and the enduring constraints of embedded masculine codes of stoicism, courage, and patriotism, and rejection of intimations of ‘weakness’. One reason for this lack of evidence is that the intimate lives of men have proven more difficult to study than those of women, in part because entrenched gender norms have inhibited men’s desire to express their emotions openly. Reflecting this, historians have tended to prioritise the centrality of work and leisure as key issues in understanding masculine identity (Abrams 2017).

A recent turn in studies of masculinity away from social and cultural approaches towards interrogation of emotion and subjectivity is, however, revealing a more complicated picture. Although they remain influential, social and cultural frameworks have been criticized for tending to conceive of masculinity only in terms of external codes and structures, and taking for granted the processes through which men come to identify with such codes (Edley and Wetherell 1995). At the same time, analysis of autobiographical accounts, such as personal memoirs, has provided an opportunity to explore the subjective sense of self expressed in such accounts, and to decode notions of manliness and masculinity (Roper 2005a).

In this article, I draw upon both of these academic strands in my analysis. Critical masculinities research, which reflects both feminist and sociological/social-cultural perspectives, usefully highlights, among other things, that there is no universal form of masculinity (hence ‘masculinities’), and that commonalities and differences among men exist according to class, race, age, religious belief, disability, and sexual orientation. Masculinities are seen as dynamic, actively produced, and collectively constructed. Connell’s work has been particularly influential in developing the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, describing the enduring dominance of certain forms of masculinity (usually white, middle-class, and heterosexual) over others (Connell 1995).

In addition, a psychological/psychoanalytic approach also has value in providing the tools to interrogate in more depth, as Roper puts it (Roper 2005b), the emotional experiences of men as public actors, the qualities and character of their relationships with others, and the place of unconscious motivations in social action. From this point of view, masculinities are regarded not just as a matter of social or cultural construction, but also as an aspect of personality. Connell too has recognised the importance of this approach, commenting in her seminal work, ‘Masculinities’, that a ‘purely normative definition gives no grip on masculinity at the level of personality’ (Connell 1995).

Critical ethnography is also relevant to my approach here, drawing attention to the importance of contextualising the position of the researcher in relation to the subject. It has been argued that one reason people conduct genealogical research is in order to understand their roots and to get to know their ancestors as people (Lambert 1996). I certainly recognise this motivation in myself, and that ‘connecting through time’ is a significant impulse. Lambert’s characterisation of genealogists and family historians is apposite too: They are *memory workers* who are pivotal in the process of constructing their families’ collective memories (Lambert 2002). As Yakel argues, they are ‘both seekers and creators of meaning’ (Yakel 2004).

In his article for this Special Edition of Genealogy on ‘Fathers and forefathers’, Robb raises the important, related issue of whether an academic researcher, who is also a family ‘insider’, may have access to additional material and resources that may unduly influence their interpretation of the material they have set out to analyse (Robb 2020). He notes that this is a particular problem if applying a strict discourse analysis, which pays attention to the text alone, but argues that a psycho-social approach, which explores personal motivations and subjectivity in more depth, might allow for other, relevant knowledge to be drawn upon. In line with this perspective, for this article I was able to supplement the primary source (my grandfather’s memoir) with an oral history interview I conducted with my mother Margaret (his daughter) around 50 years after his memoir was written. In the interview, she sheds additional light on a number of important issues addressed in the memoir. For example, her memories of her happy childhood and her positive relationship with her father contrasts markedly with the melancholic tone of his text. I would argue that her ‘counter narrative’ provides a richer understanding of her father’s emotional state and his fathering practices during this period; in particular, it appears to reflect the common split identified in the literature on men and masculinities between men’s public and private presentations of self. Although there are risks in family researchers making exaggerated claims on the basis of scant evidence, in this instance these fears seem misplaced, and the additional account of my mother adds important context to the memoir.

2. Key Themes

This article analyses a powerful memoir written by my grandfather, Alex MacDonald, in 1945–1946, lamenting the death of his only son, Ian, killed in action near the end of the Second World War (MacDonald and Ruxton 2017a). Contrary to the stereotype that men contained their emotions in such circumstances, this extended lament expresses (albeit in private) a range of deep feelings: Love and care for the departed son, tenderness towards his wife and daughter, guilt at sending his son away to boarding school, loss of faith in (Christian) religion, and a sense of worthlessness and personal failure.

The memoir also reveals an intimate picture of a middle-class white British father spending significant amounts of leisure time with his young son, reflecting the growing pressure by the 1920s

for fathers to be companions to their children, and partners to their wives. Unlike their 19th century counterparts, fathers were increasingly expected to play a role with older as well as younger children, participating with them in sports and leisure activities, and taking them on trips (Pleck 2004).

This emotional closeness can be contrasted with the impact of the geographical distance over which this narrative played out after Ian was sent to boarding school in Scotland at age 13. Living in Chile, Alex sadly never saw his son again in the flesh after 1937 and prior to his death in February 1945 while serving with the Allied forces pushing into Germany in the last months of the Second World War. His wife, Susan, only saw him in the last four months of his life, having made the perilous journey by boat across the Atlantic in order to do so.

Tellingly, although the interwar period offered young people far greater freedom in their social relations, Alex's memoir contains very little information about Ian's teenage years, other than references to his school and cadet achievements. Although his parents' decision to send Ian to Loretto School as a boarder appears to have been prompted by a desire to 'toughen him up' and 'make him a man', they played little part in this process. Instead, the threat and reality of war meant that boys like Ian were forced to grow up quickly and 'become men' through the imposition of the strict, muscular codes of school and services. Alex's memoir also reflects the experience of migrants from Britain—and more specifically Scotland—after the end of the First World War, renewing an age-old pattern. Under the Empire, migrating Scots had always been soldiers, missionaries, merchants, doctors, engineers, scientists, planters, and administrators. The 1920s exodus reached unprecedented levels, in part stimulated by a collapse in world trade and economic decline at home (Devine 2011). While they were part of the Scottish global diaspora, Alex and Susan also felt strongly tied to Britain and to Scotland, and this attachment was, understandably, especially strong during the War when their son was serving in the forces. Although not discussed in detail in this article, Hall's important work on 19th-century links between Birmingham and Jamaica has demonstrated that such interconnections reflect more than just a binary between domestic and imperial; they also point to the ways in which 'Britishness' (usually subsumed under 'Englishness') needs to be understood not only in terms of class and gender, but also of race and ethnicity (Hall 2002).

3. Alexander MacDonald: Migration, Marriage, and Family

Alex MacDonald (commonly known as 'Mac') was the grandfather I never knew. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, on 26 September 1894 and educated at Hutchesons' Boys' Grammar School in the Gorbals area of the city. He served as a Second Lieutenant in the 6th Battalion of The Seaforth Highlanders during the First World War and was invalided out, having been wounded in the leg, and also been affected by poison gas. During his convalescence, he qualified as a chartered accountant with the Glasgow Institute of Accountants and Actuaries in 1919, while living with his sisters in the relatively affluent area of Cathcart in Glasgow.

As a result of being gassed, Alex suffered from acute asthma; he probably inhaled chlorine or phosgene, both significant lung irritants. Apparently, the doctors believed that in his case, nothing more could be done to help him in Scotland. It was, therefore, suggested he move to a dry climate, where the lungs would be less affected¹. Having been appointed to a position with the accountancy firm Deloitte, Plender, Griffiths, and Co. in Chile, he was unexpectedly redirected on arrival in South America to the office in Lima in Peru. Unfortunately, the damp and foggy conditions in Lima were very unsuitable, and it was only eight years later that he was able to move to Santiago, where the climate was much better for his health. More happily, he met and married his wife, Dorothy (commonly known as 'Susan') in Lima, where she worked for the British Consulate as a secretary, having previously been employed by a government Ministry in London during the First World War. She was born in the

¹ Several destinations were proposed, including California, Australia, and Chile.

Bahamas in 1896; her father was a Wesleyan Minister and an aspiring poet and author, and her mother was a journalist and author, too².

In Chile, Alex and Susan were active in the British and Chilean communities and had many friends in both. He worked as Senior Partner in Deloitte's, before becoming Managing Director of Odeon, a subsidiary of E.M.I. (Electrical & Musical Industries), a job he much enjoyed because of his great love of music. Outside work, he designed several renowned golf courses³ and wrote a guide to trout fishing in Chile, finally published posthumously by his grandson (my brother) in 2017 (MacDonald and Ruxton 2017b). They were very involved in charitable work. For example, she helped set up a soup kitchen after one of the serious earthquakes in Chile, obtaining an M.B.E.⁴ for her efforts⁵. They were both very committed to supporting Britain during the Second World War, and he was Chairman of the War Effort, for which he received a C.B.E.⁶ in 1943.

In his memoir, Alex details some of the key individual events that impacted, either positively or negatively, on their family life: "The ups and downs were many but principally, the birth of Ian in 1923, the death of Mary Elizabeth Florence at the age of eight months in 1925, Ian's illness in 1927, the birth of Margaret in 1932, Susan's M.B.E. in [left blank, 1934], Ian's winning the Intermediate Honour Cup in 1933, my illnesses in 1930 and 1939, my C.B.E. on 1 January 1943, Margaret's musical triumphs, and finally the awful tragedy of 1945." What stands out here of course is "the awful tragedy of 1945", referring to the death of their son. It is clear that this cataclysmic event had a profound impact on both his parents: "The war was over for Ian and life was over for Susan and for me."

4. Ian Lester MacDonald: 'Remembered with Love and Pride'⁷

An obvious explanation for Alex's motivation to write his memoir is that it met the desire to grieve privately and achieve some form of catharsis in so doing. This, however, is not how he describes it himself (even though it was probably the case, consciously or unconsciously). In July 1946, over a year after his son's death, he states: "I do not know why I am doing this other than that I have the urge to do it, just one of those things one does without knowing why". He notes the time that has elapsed, and that he has not sought to complete "this poor attempt to record Ian's short career and to analyse my feelings".

Ian Lester MacDonald was the uncle I never knew. The bare facts of life are as follows. He was born in Edinburgh on 6 April 1923 and grew up with his parents in Peru and Chile, before being sent to boarding school in Scotland at age 13. At Loretto School, he did well academically, passing his School Certificate quite young. He became a House Prefect, was in the VI (6th) Form, Hockey and Swimming Teams, and was a Sergeant in the J.T.C (Junior Training Corps). In July 1941, he left Loretto, and in August of the same year, he joined the Royal Artillery. After two months in the ranks, and a six-month

² George J.H. Northcroft wrote the first real book to be published in the Bahamas (Sketches of Summerland, giving some account of Nassau and the Bahama Islands, Nassau, (Northcroft 1902)). Later works include: How to Write Verse (Smith's Publishing Company, (Northcroft 1915)), and Writing for Children (A. and C. Black, (Northcroft 1935)). He was also editor of the Boy's Own Annual from 1933–1935. His first wife, Emily Florence Northcroft, was a journalist, and wrote religious books, with titles such as 'Forces that Help'. She died at age 40 or 41 in 1913 or 1914. He married his second wife, Dora Northcroft, in 1917, but they later divorced. She was a successful journalist and author, editor of Housecraft Magazine, and wrote books such as Yarns on Women Pioneers (J.K. Whitehead, (Northcroft 1944a)) and Girls of Adventure, Frederick Muller Limited (Northcroft 1944b).

³ At Pucon, Los Leones, Santo Domingo (in Chile), and Los Inkas (in Peru).

⁴ Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.). It is the third highest ranking Order of the British Empire award, behind C.B.E. which is first and then O.B.E.

⁵ See Supplementary Materials to the London Gazette, 4 June 1934, No. 34056, p. 3567.

⁶ Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.). CBE is the highest ranking Order of the British Empire award. King George V created the Orders of the British Empire awards during World War I to reward services to the war effort by people helping back in the UK (i.e. not on the front line).

⁷ Remembered with Love and Pride' is the inscription on Ian MacDonald's headstone in the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Rheinberg, Nordrheinwestfalen, Germany. It was chosen by his parents.

course at Aberdeen University, he passed out as First Cadet at his O.C.T.U. (Officer Cadet Training Unit) and was commissioned in October 1942.

He then trained for active service in various parts of England, and a few days after D Day saw fighting around Caen in Normandy as part of the invasion of France. Following this, his troop was disbanded and he transferred to the infantry (rather against his wishes), and joined the Black Watch. Following several months of retraining, he was sent over to Germany on 14 February 1945 as a Lieutenant in the 5th Battalion, which formed part of the 51st Highland Division⁸. The battle fought by the Division in the Reichswald lasted almost three weeks, from the 8–28 February⁹. Ian was killed in action on the night of the 25 February, while leading his men in an attack on a farm building (which turned out to be a disguised pillbox) southwest of Goch (at Robbenhof). He was hit by a burst of Spandau machine gun fire from one of the loopholes, and was buried with 10 comrades nearby¹⁰.

5. “My Own Literary Limitations”: Development of a Narrative

Traumatic events are remembered differently from the everyday, but there is no consensus about the relationship between trauma and memory. In some cases, subjects remember a particular event with great clarity, whereas others may suppress painful memories as a survival mechanism. What is clear, though, is that those who have experienced trauma have often not come to terms with it when they write. Also, this may prevent them from producing a coherent narrative. Indeed, their accounts may be disjointed, deeply emotional, and upsetting to the narrator and readers alike (Abrams 2010).

Alex’s memoir was handwritten in four unequal tranches over a period of just over one year following Ian’s death. The first, headed ‘March 1945’ (and presumably drafted then) starts by reproducing the laconic words of the telegram informing the parents of Ian’s death:

“Important. Deeply regret report from Western Europe. Lieutenant I.L. MacDonald Black Watch killed in action 25 February 1945. The Army Council express sympathy. Letter follows.”

Under Secretary of State for War.

It then describes Alex’s experience and feelings in the immediate aftermath, and the painful wait in Buenos Aires, with his daughter, for Susan’s return by boat from the UK (not knowing when that would be). The second begins by stating that “now over ten weeks have passed” and is headed ‘June 1945’. It covers V.E. Day¹¹, and the consolation he and his wife felt as a result of King George VI’s speech on that day. Then he returns to images from Ian’s childhood: Their hopes for his future when he was born, the discovery at age four of a leaky valve in his heart and a heart murmur, pride in Ian’s school career in Chile and Scotland, and the family’s holiday with 5-year-old Ian in the UK in 1927.

The third, and longest, section (‘July 1945’) is the most poignant. It begins “Another month has passed and, if anything, the wound is deeper. The letters from his Commanding Officer and Company Commander on the field have arrived and tell us how bravely Ian died”. While it is not clear precisely when these letters were written, they obviously only reached Santiago three or four months after Ian’s death. No wonder the wound was deeper than before. Alex goes on to describe Ian’s life as a boy in Chile: His achievements at the Grange School, the fishing trips they took, his skill at horse-riding, teaching him to play golf and piano, and the family’s leave in England in 1937 when they parted and Ian left for Loretto. The section concludes by outlining Ian’s career at Loretto and in the army, and ends by recounting the circumstances in which he was killed.

⁸ This brief biography is based on the entry in the Loretto School Roll of Honour, 1939–1945, reproduced in full in Appendix III of (MacDonald and Ruxton 2017a).

⁹ Details of Operation Veritable, including maps, plans, and photographs, can be found at <http://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/veritable-1945-51st-highland-division-reichswald-forest.74787/>.

¹⁰ Undated letter from Major W.B. Johnstone to Ian’s guardian (Major Farquhar Young), Appendix I, in (MacDonald and Ruxton 2017a).

¹¹ V.E. Day (Victory in Europe Day) is the day celebrating the formal acceptance by the Allies of World War II of Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender of its armed forces on Tuesday, 8 May 1945, marking the end of World War II in Europe.

The final short section ('July, 1946') records that "another year has passed—time goes so quickly, I did not realise it was so long". Alex then reveals that Susan has been operated on twice recently, but states "I firmly believe we have seen the end of that trouble". He feels Ian's spiritual presence and that "he wants me to devote the rest of my poor life in looking after Susan and Margaret, and doing as much good as I can for my fellow men". He concludes by reflecting upon his own failings and lack of self-worth ("I am often bad-tempered, petty and unreasonable"), his doubts as to whether "the sacrifice of so many magnificent young lives was to any purpose", and his fears for the future of humanity.

Alex makes no claims of literary merit in relation to his memoir; indeed, he tends to downplay his own talents. In the Introductory Chapter to his earlier book on trout fishing, he states that "a knowledge of my own literary limitations" caused his written efforts to be confined to a few press articles. Yet his memoir is structured with more skill than is at first apparent. Within the named time periods, the narrative shifts from a significant event which grabs the attention—the arrival of the fateful telegram, memories of V.E. Day, the letters from Ian's army superiors—to Alex's memories of Ian over the years, and his reflections following his death. This structure both mirrors how memory often operates, not in linear fashion but prompted by different triggers, and maintains the interest of the reader.

6. Mourning and Melancholia

In his essay on 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Freud 1917), Freud provides psychoanalytical scaffolding for understanding the process of grieving that has remained influential. He argued that mourning and melancholia are similar but different responses to loss. In mourning, a person deals with the grief of losing of a specific love object, and this process takes place in the conscious mind. In melancholia, a person grieves for a loss he is unable to fully comprehend or identify, and, thus, this process takes place in the unconscious mind. Mourning is considered a healthy and natural process of grieving a loss, while melancholia is considered pathological.

Building on this foundation, Lindemann, through his empirical observations of grief in hospital patients, differentiated between healthy and pathological grief on the basis of the intensity and duration of their symptoms (Lindemann 1944). Among various more recent theories, the work of Kübler-Ross remains popular, setting out a relatively simple, but not necessarily linear, five-stage theory of emotional reactions to grief: 'Denial', 'anger', 'bargaining', 'depression', and 'acceptance' (Kübler-Ross 1969)¹².

The tone of Alex's memoir is one of grief and sadness throughout (although there are moments of tenderness, and a few playful digressions of gentle humour, that lighten the text¹³). What is particularly striking, though, is that Alex's mood towards the end of the memoir seems darker than earlier, even though he is trying to look forward: "I am not the man I was. My work is not what it was and sometimes I feel afraid of the future. I suppose two wars and Ian's death have been too much for me, apart from other lesser troubles". Whereas in the second section he reacts positively to the King's speech on V.E. Day, and feels that "Ian's sacrifice did mean a great deal", by the end of the text he is doubting the purpose of the sacrifice of so many young lives. Traumatic memories bring forth a range of emotions, and the process of remembering is complex. The experience is raw, and the author (and those around them) are hurting and confused, and the emotions can be overpowering. In these

¹² The Kubler-Ross five stages of grief cycle:

1. Denial: Shock and disbelief that the loss has occurred.
2. Anger: That someone we love is no longer here.
3. Bargaining: All the what-ifs and regrets.
4. Depression: Sadness from the loss.
5. Acceptance: Acknowledging the reality of the loss.

¹³ For example: "I remember when he wrote out to us on one occasion . . . to say that he did not think he had the brains to be a Chartered Accountant and thought he had better be a diplomat. I told that to one or two members of the British Embassy in Santiago, who took rather a dim view of it! It must be tough to go through life entirely devoid of a sense of humour!"

circumstances, trying to make sense of what happened, and begin the process of healing takes time. In many cases, ‘closure’ is never fully achieved. As the novelist and biographer, Blake Morrison, has said of his well-known 1990s memoir about his father (Morrison 1993): “There is no closure. I still find myself writing about my dad, even now. I go on thinking about him”.¹⁴

If his memoir was intended, even though Alex does not say so, to achieve some form of catharsis, then one has to wonder here whether he achieved this objective. From the point of view of the Kübler-Ross model, he seems stuck in the ‘depression’ stage, experiencing feelings of sadness, regret, fear, and uncertainty, but no genuine acceptance of Ian’s loss. Yet, an interesting footnote here is my mother Margaret’s account of her father, from the interview I conducted with her in 2006¹⁵, where she paints a picture of a much more optimistic and fun character: “A lot of my childhood was spent roaring with laughter because all these wonderful people that were friends of my parents were so amusing, or they were so nice to me anyway. It was all jokes, lovely jokes, my father was always full of silly jokes ... He was very funny. Very entertaining”. It is not clear exactly what period she is describing here, but given she was born in 1932, it was presumably just before or during the War. While Alex’s feelings about his life were very negatively affected by Ian’s death, it appears he (and my grandmother) managed to maintain a happy and stable home life for their daughter publicly, even though they were internally emotionally broken by his passing. To put it more positively, it may be that the reality of caring for and bringing up their daughter aided such healing as they were able to achieve, and gave them a reason to look to the future.

7. Writing, Men’s Silences, and Privatized Grieving

There is a view that to write an effective memoir it is better to wait until the pain has been processed. As Byron said: “While you are under the influence of passions, you only feel, but cannot describe them” (Byron 1850), and in some cases, it may be decades before an experience can be addressed (Sissay 2019)¹⁶. However, books composed in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy can have value, too, enabling the writer to engage with the raw emotion they are feeling, and perhaps thereby help others to do the same.

Writing is a solitary activity, removed from the continuous interchange of day-to-day conversation. It allows space for reflection, and a heightened sense of interior exploration, freeing the narrator from challenges to thought and feeling. Writing ‘makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set’ (Ong 1982). Writing also creates an enduring record, giving it a life outside and beyond the narrator. This particular form of expression helps to underpin the construction of a ‘composed’ personal narrative, which can both draw on shared cultural imagery and internal psychological processes (Dawson 1994). Roper highlights that writing can be a means of attempting to contain and put boundaries around difficult experiences, and that unconscious motivations may also be ‘at work’ in shaping a text (Roper 2001). Research has also explored the role that silence and (in)visibility play in how men interact (Rutherford 1992). Recent work has illustrated how men can both obscure their inner emotional lives, thus reproducing hegemonic masculine ideals of staying strong and stoic in the face of adversity, while they, on occasion, also seek to make aspects of their inner lives seen and heard (Schwab et al. 2016). These processes of filtering, both consciously and unconsciously, stressful events are evident in Alex’s text.

Even if it was certainly the most deeply wounding, Ian’s death was not the only tragedy to afflict my grandparents. Indeed, Alex refers to the death of Mary Elizabeth Florence in Lima at only eight months old but makes no attempt to explain what happened. In fact, as his daughter (my mother)

¹⁴ Quoted in Rachel Cooke (Cooke 2018), ‘Blake Morrison: You must write a memoir as if you’re writing a novel’, Guardian, 10 March 2018.

¹⁵ Margaret Ruxton (nee MacDonald), interviewed by Sandy Ruxton, Cheltenham, 31 May 2006 (unpublished).

¹⁶ A recent example is Lemn Sissay’s memoir about his time in the care system (Sissay 2019).

explained in my interview with her, her parents had to go to Chile on a boat trip, leaving the baby with Auntie Leena (one of her father's sisters) and her husband. However, when they got back the baby had died during an epidemic of meningitis. Although the cause was the disease, there was perhaps always the feeling that Mary Elizabeth had not been looked after properly. According to my mother, the relationship between the parents and Auntie Leena was never close after that. Nevertheless, the fact that Auntie Leena was appointed as her godmother suggests at least some degree of rapprochement and forgiveness by seven years later.

One can understand that the tension this death caused within the family was one reason why Alex would skate over it in his account, especially as the key participants were still alive at the time of writing. While his memoir was not intended to be published, it was undoubtedly easier not to explore these issues in any depth, especially if there was any risk they might overshadow the main focus on Ian's death.

Presumably this is also one reason why Alex makes only passing reference to his own experiences in the First World War. However, the harrowing nature of these, and the desire to avoid engaging with them is no doubt another. As he says early in the text: "I had seen close friends fall by my side in the last War and had been deeply affected." Yet he doesn't talk about these events, nor is there any hint that he wrote about them on another occasion. He notes only that "in the last war (1914–1918), I used to call myself a fatalist, which was another way of saying that, if you were going to get it, you would get it. If your name was on a shell or a bullet, it was no good worrying about it or thinking you could do anything to avoid it. It would happen sooner or later". The only other mentions of the First War are towards the end of the memoir about his son, when he quotes from two well-known poems 'In Flanders Field'¹⁷ and 'For the Fallen' (the latter read every year at the Remembrance Day service)¹⁸. These few asides are the closest he comes to acknowledging the impact of the First War on his own life. Yet the respiratory problems he endured throughout his life were significant, and probably contributed to his premature death in 1954 at age 59.

Similarly, he mentions, but only in passing, his illnesses in 1930 and 1939, but does not say what they were, even though it seems likely that they were relatively serious. At the start of his book about fishing in Chilean rivers, which he says was originally drafted in 1940, he writes that "... an unexpected turn of events provided me with a lot of spare time on my hands and the search for an outlet to occupy those hours of leisure is the 'raison d'être' of this book". Assuming that he is referring here to the later of his two 'illnesses', Alex again downplays his own ill-health and what may have caused it, even hiding it behind the circumlocution "an unexpected turn of events"¹⁹.

The lack of attention to his own woes displayed throughout Alex's memoir reflects a wider pattern of changing responses to death and loss that emerged at the time of the First World War, and became entrenched as a norm during and after the Second World War. Ex-servicemen chose to forget the horrors of the Great War, and preferred not to tell their families much, if anything, about their own suffering. Rather, there arose a "necessity for courageous silence" (Walter 1999), especially when the children of such veterans were required to fight in the Second World War. Jalland suggests that the change which prioritised stoicism in the face of loss was more intensive, widespread, and long-lasting from the 1940s on: "Open and expressive sorrow was more strongly discouraged in favour of a pervasive model of suppressed privatized grieving which became deeply entrenched in the nation's social psychology" (Jalland 2010).

¹⁷ *In Flanders Fields* by Canadian military doctor and artillery commander Major John McCrae, written during the Second Battle of Ypres in May 1915.

¹⁸ Robert Laurence Binyon's poem 'For the Fallen' was composed in 1914 in honour of the casualties of the British Expeditionary Force at the Battle of Mons and the Battle of Marne.

¹⁹ In a 'Brief Biography' of Alexander MacDonald, probably written jointly by my parents, it is stated that "He was persuaded by friends to write an account of his experiences in this field when he had a few months of enforced idleness in 1938 owing to illness". The slight differences visible here in dating his later illness may reflect the fact that the writing was undertaken over a period of up to two years. The biography is included in (MacDonald and Ruxton 2017b).

A particular focus was on “bearing grief with silent courage as the dead sons would have wanted” (Jalland 2010). This formulation is echoed in Alex’s memoir. Describing his son’s ‘sacrifice’, he suggests that “we must be up and doing and not give way to our grief—I am sure that is what Ian would have wanted me to do”. Similarly, the emphasis of letters from other bereaved parents in World War II is that the sons would have wanted them to be strong and stoical, with the implication that expressive grief was self-indulgent and unhelpful to the war effort (Jalland 2010).

8. Intimacy and Fatherhood

Of the recent emotional turn away from social and cultural approaches towards subjectivity, Abrams writes that: “By recovering articulations of selfhood and emotion, by bringing ‘subjectivity and emotion back into view’, historians have begun to write an alternative history of men and masculinity that privileges subjectivity and the self” (Abrams 2017). For Roper, it is important to place relationships and the webs of care in which they are suspended, understood as psychic as well as social and cultural constructs, at the centre of study (Roper 2005b).

So how are relationships described in Alex’s memoir, and what does this tell us about gender, masculinity, and fatherhood? The biographies of Alex and Susan, together first in Peru, then in Chile, suggest their life together was full, and on a day-to-day level, largely contented. As their daughter confirmed, they were sociable, they had lots of friends, and contributed significantly to the communities of which they were part. In his memoir, Alex acknowledged he often tried Susan’s patience and she often irritated him, but overall he underlined their love for each other and the strength of their partnership: “I have always loved Susan and there never could be anyone else in my affections. Throughout twenty-three years of married life we had had a lot of ups and downs but had always loved each other . . . In our case there was plenty of character on both sides and, I think, a great deal of genuine understanding.”

He notes how much he relies on his wife’s support: “She has been such a help to me, bracing me up when I feel depressed and encouraging me to greater efforts”. The support she provided went wider, too, to other members of the community (and was no doubt the source of her M.B.E. in 1934). Her daughter recalled that “she was always helping somebody. She had a lot of lame duck type friends who needed help and support, and she was there. She was good that way”. While Margaret thought this involvement came partly from her background in the Methodist tradition, it also reflects the long-standing assumption that women should be primarily responsible for care, celebrated as mothers within the family, and for ‘doing their bit’ in the community.

At various points in Alex’s narrative, it is Susan who takes a key role in managing family events and relationships. On family visits to Britain, she goes ahead with the children (with Ian in 1927, with Ian and Margaret in 1936), while he had to stay at home for work reasons. This was still a big commitment for her to undertake alone. In 1944, she was determined to go on her own, risking her own safety in order to spend time with her son before he went into action in the final months of the war. When she arrives in Argentina at Easter 1945, having learned in Freetown of Ian’s death and crossed the Atlantic with this knowledge, her “attention was diverted somewhat to Margaret, who had to get better of ‘litre’ poisoning²⁰ and needed clothes”.

Although Alex always regretted that he was unable to go on the final journey to Britain to see Ian, he comments that: “Those four final months of Ian’s life were filled with the companionship and love of his Mother and are her most treasured memory”. During the months of further training and battle courses that accompanied his transition to the infantry, “he had the good fortune to have Susan somewhere not far away, always ready to listen to his troubles and to give him the advice and

²⁰ *Lithraea caustica* (commonly known as the litre tree) is a species of flowering plants in the soapberry family, common in central Chile. It is a well-known allergenic and can cause a rash of the skin, the effects and susceptibility of which can vary greatly from person to person.

encouragement he so much required". Here he positions Susan as the one who tended to undertake emotional labour within the family, listening to Ian's worries (and also, as noted earlier, to his own).

So what of Alex's notion and practice of fatherhood? He registers his pride, shared with Susan, at his birth: "All our hopes were centred in him and for the next twenty-one years we gave him everything it was in our power to give". He describes the next year or two after his birth as "uneventful", even though these years encompassed the important stages of cutting teeth, and learning to walk and talk. It seems unlikely that his mother would have described these key events with such detachment. Nevertheless, he covers the discovery of Ian's leaky heart valve and heart murmur in more detail, and returns repeatedly to his concerns about these weaknesses later in the memoir (see 'Toughening Up: Becoming a Man' below).

In the 1920s, fathers were increasingly urged to be involved with their sons in order to provide proper gender role models. This thinking was influenced by Freudian psychology, which gained traction in this decade (Pleck 2004). Particular concern was over boys who were deemed 'sissy' or effeminate, and it was recommended that fathers should do sports and outdoor activities with their sons in order to build boys who were appropriately 'manly' (Rademacher 1933).

Although there is no evidence that Alex was directly influenced by such notions, he says much about the activities he undertook with Ian in his childhood. He attempts to teach him golf and piano, goes horse-riding with him and, in particular, takes him on fishing trips. He describes a "wonderful and unforgettable" holiday in the summer of 1933 when Ian was 10 years old "He learned to ride a horse and caught a fine one pound rainbow trout casting from the bank, to my intense satisfaction". Later he records that "He and I rode a lot together particularly in the early mornings when he had school holidays and it gave me the utmost pleasure to see him ride so well and with such obvious enjoyment". On a farewell fishing trip to the South of Chile in 1936, he comments on the similarities of their characters and how well they got on: "Ian and I had a lot in common, the same things appealed to us, we had a similar sense of humour, and he was a fine companion for me".

Notably, Alex mentions in passing that Ian called him 'Daddy'; while the term 'dad' was used in the 19th century, the term 'daddy' was invented in the 1920s and indicated a growing level of affection for fathers. Pleck records, however, that 'daddy' was a term used more by girls than boys. Daddy was supposed to be his daughter's companion so that she could learn about the world of men (Pleck 2004). In his memoir, Alex's affection for his daughter is very evident—and her interview suggests the feeling was mutual. The day after the telegram arrived, he stresses "What a comfort she was to me then and has been ever since! I saw very clearly that her sweet young life must be preserved and that our small family life must be rebuilt around her". Later he emphasises that: "Margaret is a wonderful consolation to us both. She is such a sweet girl, so full of life, so intelligent and so devoted to us and her home". He concludes that "My one great desire now is to see that her life is a happy one, as far as it lies within my power to do so".

Alex says little about domestic life with the family, and does not recount key events such as birthdays and anniversaries. Of course, he spent more time at work, and was probably not at home as much as Susan was, but perhaps also he did not feel able to talk with as much authority as his wife about domestic matters, as the habitual gendered division of labour meant that 'home' was more likely to be considered 'a woman's place'. In my interview with her, my mother also records that they had a maid (Bertha) who came when she was a baby and stayed all the time until her mother (my grandmother) left Chile in the late 1950s. They also had a cook, and both lived in. In other words, much of the domestic labour was 'outsourced' to other working women, so it is unsurprising that Alex knew less about it, and participated to a very limited degree.

9. 'Home' Schooling in Scotland

A key moment in Ian's short life was his parents' decision to send him to senior school in Scotland. One reason was probably that the Grange School, although modelled on British educational principles, had only been founded in 1928 and had a relatively small number of boys attending. His parents

may, therefore, have felt that an established public school in Britain would offer wider opportunities. They also believed, however, as many other Scots overseas did, in the benefits of a specifically Scottish education and, therefore, sent Ian ‘home’ to board at Loretto School, in Musselburgh, East Lothian, to complete his education²¹. He started there in September 1936, having travelled from Chile with his mother and sister in August of that year.

Alex does not record whether Ian himself was in favour of this move, but no doubt he accepted it, despite his attachment to his life in Chile. Having stayed behind (presumably due to work commitments), Alex arrived in Britain in April 1937 to reunite with all the family, taking a holiday in Seahouses, Northumberland. Their subsequent parting at Euston Station at the end of September (from where Ian would travel up to Loretto, and the rest of the family would leave the next day for Chile, via New York), suggests that, whatever the external appearance, the separation was difficult—especially for Ian: “My last recollection of Ian is a painful one—a small boy with his eyes filled with tears saying goodbye”.

As it turned out, Alex did not see Ian again after 1937 and knew him as a man only from photographs and his wife’s descriptions of him in the last few months of his life. In other words, his father did not see him from age 13 until his death at age 21, and thus missed out on being a day-to-day part of his adolescence and his transition to adulthood. Nor, of course, did his mother, apart from right at the end of his life.

According to Alex, “As far as we know, his life at Loretto (1936–1941) was happy—in any event he loved his old school, that we do know and surely that is the answer”. He noted, too, however, that: “He had his ups and downs at Loretto and showed a lot of pluck in overcoming the difficulties which handicapped him”. He refers later in his memoir to “that unfortunate physical weakness which must have been very embarrassing for him and was undoubtedly the main reason why he was rather quiet and shy by nature”. Alex records that Ian’s physical weakness “handicapped him at games, particularly rugger”, noting also in a nod to the muscular approach of the school that rugger “is very important at Loretto” ([Mangan 2012](#))²². Nevertheless, it did not appear to hamper Ian too much as he was in the first 11 for hockey, and also played subsequently for Aberdeen University.

The phrase “as far as we know” chimes with the further revelation that “his letters were few and far between and he was a thoroughly bad correspondent”²³. Although it may well be true that, in retrospect, he loved his old school, my mother’s recollection does not accord with the perception that Ian’s life at Loretto was “happy”. She told me: “He seemed to be desperately homesick. One thing I used to hear them say was: ‘Another week’s gone by, no letter from Ian, no letter from Ian’. He was very bad about writing. He told my mother when she met him that he couldn’t bear it, he was so homesick. Isn’t that awful?”. She remembered her father used to write to Major Farquhar Young (Ian’s guardian in Scotland) and say “‘Can you get Ian to write to us, please?’ He did write, but not very much . . . I think he was desperately homesick. One or two of the letters said: ‘I can’t wait to get back to Chile’”.²⁴

It is hard to reconcile these very different accounts of Ian’s experience at Loretto. It seems likely that his parents just did not know how homesick Ian was, especially as his mother said she was told this by Ian at the end of his life. My grandfather may also have skated over the reality of Ian’s homesickness in his memoir, because acknowledging this would have made him feel more guilty than

²¹ By coincidence, my father, Allan Dey Ruxton (1925–2017), also attended Loretto School during the same period, having been sent by his Scottish tea planter parents from what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Although a couple of years younger than Ian MacDonald, he and my father are pictured at one stage in the same school hockey team photograph!

²² Loretto School always had a strong reputation for emphasis on physical activities and exercise, going back in particular to the leadership of H.H. Almond, Headmaster from 1862–1903 (see [Mangan 2012](#)).

²³ Ian’s Headmaster at Loretto, Dr. Greenlees, also noted in a letter in Appendix I to the memoir that Ian was “not a great correspondent even when not overburdened with work”.

²⁴ The view that he was homesick at Loretto, at least in the early years there, is reinforced by the reproduction of a postcard to his sister, Margaret, in the front of the memoir. Sent from Lake Villarrica in March 1936, when he was on the farewell fishing trip with his father, it shows him in a happy frame of mind prior to his departure for Loretto.

he already did for sending Ian away to Loretto. Perhaps the most convincing explanation is that both accounts have some truth to them as they reflect different periods of Ian's experience at Loretto. His early homesickness—common in the early stages among children who board—may well have been replaced later by feelings of affection and belonging.

Whatever the reality was, it is clear that his parents later had doubts about their decision to send Ian to Loretto, and regretted the time that they were apart from him: "I often wonder, in the light of subsequent events, if we had known then what the future held in store for us, would we have sent Ian to Loretto? We did what we felt was best for the boy, and if it was wrong in that it may have deprived him and us of a few years of happiness together, I should be eternally sorry". My mother confirmed in her interview that they certainly regretted sending him. Indeed, the seven or eight years of absence must have been an appalling wrench, particularly as those years formed a third of Ian's life.

10. 'Toughening Up': Becoming a Man

One question worth exploring is what prompted Alex and Susan to send Ian to Loretto, especially given their subsequent doubts. It seems likely that their motivations were similar to those described by Heward in her study of the interplay between Ellesmere College, a minor British public school, and the approach of different groups of middle-class parents who sent their children there in the interwar years (Heward 1988). Drawing on over 2000 letters written by parents to the headmaster and governors in the period 1929–1950, she explores the aspirations, plans, and fears of the parents, and what they reveal about the role of such schools in the construction of masculinity. For most parents, it was important for sons to be brought up as capable providers, and prepared for occupations and careers (preferably professional ones). Being a man was, therefore, primarily about being a good breadwinner and having a high, secure income from a respected occupation. Boys' education should be prioritised over that of girls, as the latter would most probably marry and be dependent on their husbands. In general, there was a division of responsibility between fathers and mothers; fathers were more concerned with fees, and the management of their sons' education and careers, and mothers with their health, welfare, and clothing. In the cases of boys whose parents were abroad, there was often much correspondence (often with guardians as intermediaries) with the school about school reports and holiday arrangements. In line with these aspirations on the part of the parents, and drawing on historical legacies of fears of degeneration and national decline and the desire to reinforce physical courage and stoic endurance (Tosh 1999, 2008), elite schools such as Ellesmere sought to define and enforce particular masculinising practices among their boys. These included rigidly enforced dress codes, discipline, academic competition, hierarchy, team games, and gender segregation among the staff. Having said this, Roper suggests that the reality was more nuanced than in Heward's account (Roper 1990). For him, public school education in the interwar years fostered some contradictory images of manliness, for example, by celebrating moral conformity while being profoundly homoerotic, and preaching manly independence while demanding slavish obedience. Also, although public schools could result in psychological scars, he argues that Heward plays down their active role in empowering middle-class boys and lifting them to a new class position.

Based on their middle-class backgrounds, it seems likely that Alex and Susan largely subscribed to the public school ethos described by Heward. Alex's language and comments certainly suggest a desire for Ian to 'toughen up' and an expectation that being sent away to school in Scotland would make him into a man. He writes that in his last year at the Grange School, Ian was a boarder, "so as to be 'broken in' for Loretto". He says Ian always took part in the games at both his schools, and "never shirked", even though he was "very small for his years always". He notes too how he had "often thought in recent years of that small boy of four years old with the weak heart, who grew into a tough Loretto schoolboy and later a fine hardy soldier". Similarly, he wonders at Ian's transformation into a "big handsome tough young Black Watch officer", clearly a source of great pride to his parents: "He evidently showed ability and leadership of a high order and we were naturally very proud of him".

The emphasis here is on a particular form of (hegemonic) masculinity to which boys and young men were (and, in many ways, still are) generally expected to aspire, characterised by ‘manly’ competitiveness, stoicism, patriotism, heroism, and avoidance of ‘unmanly’ weakness, interrelating to affirm (adult) masculine identity. This model of masculinity is entrenched by military organisations, and the underpinning values are publicly endorsed and institutionalised in national culture, especially in times of war (Higate and Hopton 2005; Connell 1998). Within this context, it is no accident that Ian’s bravery, and the “gallant” attack that led to his death should be celebrated in his father’s memoir, and in the letters sent to his parents afterwards by his superior and by the minister who prepared his body for burial.

Given the dominance of these ideals of masculinity, it is unsurprising that Ian, too, seems to have assimilated these values. However, knowing that he had a history of physical weakness, his ‘shyness’ in his youth, and his homesickness at school, it is interesting to explore whether Ian really felt comfortable in this new ‘tougher’ shell, and how this transition took place. Of course, he had no option but to enlist—to do otherwise would have been seen as cowardice. However, contrary to some men’s accounts of their anticipation and excitement at the prospect of engagement, their sense of embarking on a great adventure, and their desire not to be ‘left out’ (Nagel 2005), we have no sense of this in relation to Ian. What we do know is that he, according to his mother’s testimony, was “strangely quiet on that day of parting” (11 February 1945). The minister also recorded in his letter that “Ian was a little nervous on the Sunday of his death and I noticed it in our little chat after the ‘D’ co[mpan]y service”. It is impossible to know precisely how he experienced these occasions and what his state of mind was at this time, and there are risks of over-interpreting the limited evidence here. No doubt he felt fearful of what was to come, and it may be that he did, as his father suggests, have “a presentiment that he would not come back”. He may have been especially anxious because of his enforced transfer from the artillery to the infantry, and the very different, close-quarters fighting role that this would be likely to require. Though, perhaps underneath it all, he never felt at ease with taking on the mantle of the tough manly heroic soldier, leading his men, when his heart was still with his family and what seems to have been a happy—even idyllic—early childhood in Chile.

This final reflection recalls aspects of Rutherford’s analysis of masculinity and Englishness in the late 19th and 20th centuries, namely, that for upper- and middle-class boys sent away to public schools, the prohibition on male emotional expression meant that the trauma of being torn from home could never adequately be repaired. As he notes, this resulted in an inescapable tension between a desire to return to close family identification in boyhood and the need to assert manhood through distance from it (Rutherford 1997).

11. ‘Floundering in a Sea of Doubt’: Faith and Death

In the 19th century, Christian faith heavily influenced the cultural norms around death and mourning, providing a model of acceptance of death as the will of God, consolation for the bereaved, and some hope of immortality—and even reunion—in Heaven. Sorrow was often expressed in highly emotional terms, drawing on the language of the Bible, the prayer book, and popular hymns. However, from 1914 onwards, religion became a less dominant force in practices around death and loss, and Protestant churches in particular appear to have offered less comfort and spiritual leadership than previously. Instead, it can be argued that such leadership gradually shifted to medicine and psychology (Jalland 2010).

Reflecting this move away from finding consolation in faith, Alex’s memoir is suffused with religious doubt. Having just heard the news of his son’s death, he calls out in anguish:

“There was no God! There could be no God to allow this sort of thing to go on in the world! What possible Divine purpose could there be in allowing a few unscrupulous politicians—call them Nazis or Fascists or anything you like—to wreck everything there was decent in life and plunge the world into a holocaust of death and destruction! As I paced the floor, I was imbued with a spirit of revolt against God, against everybody and everything”.

Nevertheless, on the Sunday following the news of Ian's death, he attended Holy Communion at 8.30 a.m. and his daughter went with him to Morning Service at 10.30 a.m. He relates how gravely he suffered at those services, especially the latter, but maintained "I had to go. I was asked if I would like a special hymn and chose Onward Christian Soldiers but was unable to sing a word nor could I sing a single word of God Save the King at the end of the service".

This sense of confusion and desperation, tinged with revolt, is echoed later in the manuscript. Writing in July 1945, he notes that: "The Bishop says the only help we can have is from the Holy Spirit—it must be wonderful to get that comfort and I can only assume that my faith is not strong enough yet for that as I am still floundering in a sea of doubt and grasping for a helping hand". At the end of this section, he again doubts whether Ian's death can be seen as part of the Divine Plan: "The ways of the Almighty [God] are exceeding strange and, if one believes in anything at all, one must accept Ian's early death as part of the Divine plan. Say what you like, it is hard to believe that!" Not only does religion not offer him consolation, but there appears to be nothing else to replace it either.

At this point, only just over year after the tragedy, it is clear that Alex is, at best, struggling with his faith. Moreover, his writing refers on more than one occasion to his sense of his own worthlessness and personal failure: "When I analyse my situation, I feel that I have been a failure in life. What have I achieved? In the material sense, little or nothing—in the cultural and spiritual fields, nothing". This bleak self-assessment, especially from a man who achieved so much, and was certainly a key figure, alongside Susan, in the British-Chilean community, reflects the depth of his grief. Perhaps Alex's loss of self-esteem here reflects continuing symptoms of Freudian melancholia, whereby the ego is itself presented as worthless.

It is hard to say how long Alex's disillusionment with formal religion lasted, but it appears he became reconciled and was consoled by his faith later on (as was Susan). We know from my interview with my mother in 2006 that they attended Anglican Church almost every Sunday, and that he played the organ there most of the time. Margaret certainly believed that religion was a comfort: "It helped. I think it did help. I'm sure it did. I think she got pretty angry about God's will being this, but they propped each other up very well. They were really amazing ... they did have great faith. I do know that".

12. 'Our Great Country': Interconnections with 'Home'

An important aspect of Alex's narrative is the relation between his middle-class family in Chile (and, prior to this, Peru), where he settled and established his family, and the 'home' country (Britain, or more precisely, Scotland²⁵), and the impact of the geographical distance over which this is played out.

It is unsurprising that Chile was regarded as one of the possible destinations for Alex when it was suggested at the end of the First World War that he leave Scotland for the sake of his health. As well as a more conducive climate, the British had been very important in the formation of the Chilean nation and British communities were established in various parts of the country (Edmundson 2009)^{26,27}.

Having said this, British influence declined significantly in the interwar years. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, more than 30% of Chile's imports were from Britain. However, Britain emerged from the Great War as a debtor nation and no longer had the capacity to lend (Miller 1991), and British traders struggled to remain competitive (Barton 2000). Thereafter, British interests in Chile declined rapidly (as they did in Latin America in general), further challenged by the inroads made by

²⁵ The influence of Scots in the British Empire and overseas more generally, as administrators, settlers, temporary residents, professionals, plantation owners, and as military personnel has long been recognised. See (Mackenzie and Devine 2011).

²⁶ The history of Anglo-Chilean relations, going back as far as Bloody Queen Mary in 1554 (who was also Queen of Chile), and continuing up through the colonialist period, left a legacy which spread into society at large. Immigrants moved initially to the port of Valparaiso, and then to others, such as Punta Arenas, Iquique, and Pisagua. British technology in mining, railway, maritime infrastructure, and other industrial applications predominated in Chile in the latter half of the 19th century, continuing through to the 1930s.

²⁷ Even today, over 700,000 Chileans may have British or Irish origin, amounting to about 4% of the population.

American businesses. The reality was that by the mid-1930s Britain had become more important to the region as a market than as the traditional provider of manufactured goods (Edmundson 2009).

For those who emigrated or were based in Chile it was nevertheless important to retain their links to 'Home' (as it was for most other Britons who settled abroad, either as part of the Empire or beyond). They brought with them neighbourhoods of white, British, middle-class character, schools, social, sport clubs, business organisations - and habitual practices such as afternoon tea (still observed by Chileans as 'onces'). Against this background, Alex and Susan's wide community connections are readily explicable, as was their decision to send their son to the Grange School in Santiago.

In his Introduction to his book on trout fishing, Alex makes explicit the similarity he sees in aspects of the Chilean landscape and his Scottish homeland, and the positive feelings that this arouses in him: "Certain parts of the south of Chile remind me very much of my native land (Bonnie Scotland) and, in recalling to me the beauty of that little country north of the Tweed, stir in me a deeper affection for the land of my adoption, my second home". In a biographical tribute, probably added in the 1990s by his daughter and her husband (my parents) they confirm that "Alex MacDonald had an abiding love for his native Scotland and for his adopted country, Chile, and its people, among whom he had many friends".

Despite this wholehearted affection for Chile, his parents were determined that Ian should have British nationality. When Susan was pregnant with Ian, they were living in Lima, but they returned to Edinburgh for his birth. As Alex comments in his memoir, "we had been so anxious to have him born on British soil, and we certainly had achieved our object ... he would carry on the family name and we would do everything possible to prepare him to become a worthy citizen of our great country". In the end, their primary allegiance was "to our great country". One assumes here that the country is 'Great Britain', although it could be read as referring to Scotland specifically.

This attachment to Britain and 'Britishness' is reinforced in several places in Alex's text. As mentioned earlier, both he and Susan had played a significant role in organising support for the war effort in Chile, and the contribution of British citizens overseas in terms of manpower and materiel was significant (as was that of citizens from British colonies, especially in India, West Africa, and the Caribbean)²⁸. Given their son was enlisted in Britain, their participation would no doubt have been strongly reinforced.

When Susan returned to South America having visited Ian (in what turned out to be the last four months of his life), he describes her on arrival as exemplifying 'British motherhood': "Dressed in a very smart black costume with a gold Black Watch badge on the lapel—a present from Ian—she looked so well, so brave and I have never been so proud of her. To me she exemplified British motherhood, one of the main reasons, if not the strongest reason, why we as a nation have pulled through this war ... " He does not define precisely what he means by this term, but it appears to signify to him a certain pride, loyalty, strength, and sense of duty and service, especially in support of the forces.

A couple of months later, he reflects that V.E. Day (8 May 1945) gave rise to a sad mixture of feelings for him and his wife: "Grief that Ian was not there to celebrate it and would never return and restrained joy that our great country had been delivered from this dreadful ordeal". This, of course, was a common experience. Amid the rejoicing in cities around the world, many people were mourning the death of a friend or relative, or worried about those who were still serving overseas. For many, the jubilation of V.E. Day was, therefore, hard to bear. For my grandparents, though, it was the measured and slow deliberation of the King's broadcast speech that stood out for them from that day, giving them succour, and renewed motivation: "What a message for the bereaved! It was as if he had spoken to us. We had sought comfort in so many ways without avail and as the days passed felt less and less

²⁸ Troops from the British Empire fought in every theatre of war during World War Two. For example, over 2.5 million Indian citizens were in uniform during the war. The colonies also sent large quantities of food and other materials to British and Commonwealth forces, and to the British at home. (Sherwood, M. 'Colonies, Colonials and World War Two', http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/colonies_colonials_01.shtml).

inclined to take part in anything. But, after listening to the King speak, we could not but feel that Ian's sacrifice did mean a great deal and that we were letting him down if we did not try for the rest of our lives to do something, however humble, for our fellow men."²⁹

Interestingly, Alex doesn't mention that the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, also made a radio broadcast that day, announcing the welcome news that the War had ended in Europe³⁰. What is not in doubt is that they were very patriotic and admired Churchill immensely. As my mother told me: "They thought Churchill was just brilliant . . . At the time his speeches were quite formidable. They really kept the morale of the people up. I'm sure they did." This was felt not just by Alex and Susan, but also by many others in the British community, who listened avidly to B.B.C.³¹ broadcasts and, in particular, the latest news and Churchill's speeches. It is worth noting, however, that this patriotic framing of Churchill's role in the War is not the only perspective here; in recent years, this discourse has been challenged by some as a romanticised and partial myth, impeding an honest interpretation of British history (Heffer 2015).

13. Discussion

13.1. *Memoir, Masculinity, and Subjectivity*

The motives for writing memoirs vary widely. Among these, achieving catharsis (a healing of one's own—and others'—wounds) is often paramount. For others, it is important to preserve a story that would otherwise be forgotten. As noted earlier, Alex says he does not know why he is writing, other than that he has an urge to do so. He describes his work as "this poor attempt to record Ian's short career and to analyse my feelings". Clearly, though, he is in some way seeking to recall his son's life and their relationship in order to make sense of the cataclysm that befell them, and to set down and interrogate an important moment in family history. In doing so, he narrates a story that is worth telling, and resonates with the untold stories of so many others from that time.

Virginia Woolf said the reason so many memoirs are failures is that they leave out the person to whom things happened. "The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened" (Woolf 1976). To what extent then do we get a good sense of the author and his son from this memoir?

Alex places himself at the centre of his narrative, tending to write in the first person using 'I'. By contrast, research shows that women tend to place themselves within a web of relationships in their narratives, relying more often than men on 'we' or 'us' in describing events (Abrams 2010). Having said this, Alex makes only fleeting reference to the impact of the traumatic experiences that he underwent during the First World War ("I had seen close friends fall by my side in the last War and had been deeply affected."), and how they coloured his life later. Of course, the main focus here is on Ian, yet one cannot but wonder what Alex's life was like before. His silence about his early life and, in particular, his experience of the Great War is telling, and reflects the fact that ex-servicemen often chose to forget the horrors, if they could, and preferred not to tell their families about them (Walter 1999). In a sense, then, he may implicitly be writing about two wars, rather than just one.

Despite the fact that his story is only really picked up from Ian's birth in 1923 (when Alex was already 28 years old), we learn quite a lot about his outlook. He is informed by his white, middle-class

²⁹ Alex was probably reflecting the penultimate paragraph of the King's speech in particular: "We shall have failed, and the blood of our dearest will have flowed in vain, if the victory which they died to win does not lead to a lasting peace, founded on justice and established in good will. To that, then, let us turn our thoughts on this day of just triumph and proud sorrow; and then take up our work again, resolved as a people to do nothing unworthy of those who died for us and to make the world such a world as they would have desired, for their children and for ours". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv9CcPUU9dw&feature=emb_logo.

³⁰ Winston Churchill spoke at 3 p.m. and King George VI at 9 p.m. (UK time). Santiago was five hours behind, so in theory at least my grandparents could have heard both speeches during the daytime.

³¹ British Broadcasting Corporation.

upbringing in Scotland: He is hard-working, intelligent, patriotic, and committed to duty and public service. He provides for his family, and is tender and loving towards all its members. He is enthusiastic about his many pursuits and hobbies and, reflecting emerging notions at that time of fathers as companions, he is keen to share them with his children. He has a delightful sense of humour, has many friends (both British and Chilean), and is very sociable.

Yet in spite of these many positive attributes, his memoir is heavy with self-doubt. He says he is often “bad-tempered, petty and unreasonable”. He states that he has achieved nothing in either the cultural or spiritual fields. Under the stress of two world wars, and Ian’s death, he feels that he has been a failure in life. It is hard to reconcile this self-image with the picture his daughter provides of her father: “[He] was always full of silly jokes ... He was very funny. Very entertaining”, and the happy times she spent with him.

Of Ian, we learn something of his character in different moments: Early on, his frailty, his shyness, his sense of humour. Later, his transformation into a handsome, tough, army officer. However, inevitably, it is hard for Alex to explore how this transition happened, as he was not physically present during this process, and only had irregular letters and his wife’s testimony at the end of Ian’s life to draw upon. He repeats his pride in the adult Ian turned into, yet the poignant absence is his teenage years, only populated by school and army achievements. Notably, his father records that they had a lot in common and that they had a similar sense of humour. There are also hints, highlighted earlier in this article, that Ian also had some of the emotionality and self-doubt that his father described in himself.

A critical masculinities perspective may be helpful here in making sense of the apparent tensions and contradictions between what Alex (and possibly Ian, too) displayed in public and what he felt in private. He appears, consciously or unconsciously, to subscribe to a certain type of masculinity, forged and inculcated by the daily practices and routines of institutions such as the family, church, school, and armed services: Tough, independent, rational, and keen to avoid anything that smacks of ‘weakness’ or femininity.

These common, collective features are not only produced from unique personal histories, but also by a web of dynamic social, cultural, and psychological forces that go into the making of masculinities, shifting over time and space. Jackson writes in his ground-breaking autobiography, ‘Unmasking Masculinity’ (Jackson 1990): “Many men hold themselves together through these public presentations of self” that maintain the appearance of correctness and certainty. This pretence is sustained through many men learning to manage a split in their daily lives: “the division between their working relations and a whole range of unsettling emotions that they try to keep buttoned up but which leak out in personal relations, usually at home”. Jackson suggests that it is only by recognising these inconsistencies between public actions/relations and everyday feelings, pains, and desires (and wanting to do something about them) that it becomes possible for men to change their lives.

13.2. *Gender and Grieving in the Second World War*

During the Second World War, the discouragement of expressive and open grieving resulted in a veil of silence being drawn over the suffering of bereaved parents. As highlighted earlier in this article, powerful cultural norms submerged individual traumas beneath mass bereavement. To speak openly of one’s sorrows was regarded as selfish when so many others were suffering in silence. It is important to note that at that time there was no guidance for the bereaved to help them understand or cope with their grief, and no bereavement counsellors to encourage them to talk through their pain (Jalland 2010).

This prescription of silence became entrenched and lasted well after the War, so many families continued to grieve privately, often for many years, while outwardly putting on a show of having come to terms with their loss. Alex records that the general expectation among their acquaintances, after they had expressed condolences, was just that they would get on with their lives: “apart from our very close friends, who knew Ian and can appreciate in some measure what we are suffering, or those who have had the same experience, the general mass of acquaintances have expressed their sympathy either verbally or in writing and now feel that we must be getting over it as we seem to be carrying on

with our lives in a more or less normal way. It is just an incident, a tragedy if you like, which has come and gone like a ship passing in the night. But for us there is no slackening of the pains!" He goes on to note that "it is said that time is a wonderful healer but so far I feel that time can only make us realise more and more how much we have missed".

One important observation here is that men and women in British culture have tended to grieve in different ways, with men submerging their feelings and women being more expressive (Walter 1999). Jalland comments that the obligation to remain silent, therefore, fell especially heavily on women during the Second World War (Jalland 2010). Of course, individuals vary in how they deal with grief, and from Alex's memoir we understandably learn more about his experience than that of Susan. He wrote about his son's achievements and his own feelings, and appears to have consoled himself in part by building a strong relationship with his daughter, and immersing himself in those pursuits that he loved (principally music, golf, and fishing). It seems likely that Susan, meanwhile, talked more about her feelings to her friends. My mother's comment that her mother had various 'lame duck' friends suggests not only that Susan was looking after other female friends, but also, implicitly, that they were looking after her in return.

13.3. *Connections with 'Home'*

Even at a considerable geographical distance, expatriate, white, middle-class families felt a huge desire to feel connected to news from Britain. No doubt they felt this more acutely precisely because of the distance between them and their home country. Radio provided a lifeline in terms of finding out about current affairs, but of course it was much harder, especially in wartime, to keep up with news about friends or relatives. A noteworthy feature of Alex's memoir is the emphasis on the importance of telegrams and letters for this purpose: He complains that at school, Ian was a 'thoroughly bad correspondent'; he is read the stunning telegram telling him his son has been killed; he receives letters from Ian's commanding officer, from a major in charge of his company, and from the Church of Scotland minister who led his burial service, with commiserations and details of his killing.

Alongside this is the importance of long-distance journeys to and from Scotland: In 1923, so that Ian could be born there; in 1927, so that his heart diagnosis could be verified; in 1936, to deliver him to Loretto School; and, of course, the trip that Susan made in late 1944 so she could see Ian as an adult during his retraining and before he went off to the front again. By this stage, the Battle for the Atlantic was largely over, so presumably it was felt that it would be safe enough for her to risk the crossing—a journey that she was determined to make³². Alex notes that Susan kept in touch with him through telegrams during her stay in Scotland, and that he, therefore, knew by mid-February 1945 that Ian had, in his words, "gone overseas again". One must assume either that she did not know precisely where Ian had been posted to and/or she was unable to reveal this in a telegram. Having said this, Alex notes that by about a week later, the B.B.C. had been full of the work of the 51st Highland Division, and that the Black Watch (Ian's regiment) had been mentioned specifically. He comments: "I knew—or rather felt so strongly that it amounted to knowing—that Ian was in it".

Most poignant of all are the descriptions in Alex's memoir of the journeys made in the immediate aftermath of Ian's death: Susan returning "in a blacked-out ship on the high seas", who "would know nothing about this tragedy" (until told by the author's brother, Charlie³³, when her ship docked in Sierra Leone on the way) and Alex himself, flying with his daughter to Buenos Aires to meet Susan's

³² Although the German U-boats had been defeated, there was inevitably still a significant degree of risk in making such a crossing. Most of the remaining U-boats in the South Atlantic received an official order of withdrawal in August 1944, but the last Allied merchant ship (Baron Jedburgh) sunk by a U-boat (U-532) there was on 10 March 1945.

³³ Charlie MacDonald, younger brother of Alex, was an engineer. In 1945 he was working for the Admiralty in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Ships bound for India and the east, unable to use the Suez Canal, had to sail via the Cape, and were serviced and victualled at West African ports. Freetown was central to the Allies' naval strategy during World War II. It served as a convoy station, with up to 200 cargo and military vessels moving in and out of its well-protected harbour at the height of wartime activities.

boat, but having “no idea what ship she was on, nor when she would arrive” (finally he found out from a telegram from Charlie that she would not reach Buenos Aires until Easter 1945).

The reality of haphazard communications, long delays, and conflicting information must have exacerbated the distress for the families of those in the services—and this distress was probably sharper for those living on the other side of the world attempting to keep in touch with ‘Home’ in such difficult conditions. In my grandparents’ case, as mentioned earlier, it is possible that they did not know the circumstances in which Ian was killed until letters arrived from his Commanding Officer and Company Commander several months after his death. While these may have provided some comfort, and demonstrated a human touch alongside the grim reality, it is hard to imagine how they coped with the period of ‘unknowing’.

13.4. *Constructing Meaning after Trauma*

Narrative is a way of making sense of experience, giving it a coherence and unity that may have been lacking in practice. Traumatic experiences are inevitably more difficult to translate into narrative, precisely because it is hard, or even impossible, to rationalise them and convert them into neatly packaged stories. However, where authors have sought to undertake this task, perhaps with differing success, it is useful to explore how they seek to construct meaning from traumatic experiences.

Building on the five-stage cycle of grief set out by Kübler-Ross, Kessler recently proposed that ‘meaning’ should be a sixth stage, commenting that “meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you’re moving forward with your life”. He notes that ‘meaning’ is personal, it takes time, and that it is not necessary to understand why someone died in order to find meaning. Even when one does find meaning, it won’t feel it was worth the cost of what was lost. He concludes that meaningful connections will help to heal painful memories (Kessler 2019).

In his memoir, Alex records how, before Ian’s death, he was dreaming of the War’s end and was making plans in his head. He would take a quick trip home to Britain, and bring Ian back to Chile: “I used to see the two of us returning together and being met by Susan and Margaret! I used to think of a party I would want to throw to celebrate Ian’s return and to reintroduce him to his and our friends and how proud I should be of my soldier son! I used to think about a fishing holiday he and I would take together in the South of Chile when he would use that beautiful new Hardy Teviot rod which has been kept wrapped up in cellophane waiting for him”!

These dreams were, of course, dashed, and Alex and Susan were then faced with the terrible dilemma of how they could build something positive in the future, and try and move on after the tragedy. After hearing the King’s speech on V.E. Day, they focused on the notion of what Ian would have wanted them to do. Alex argues that: “we were letting him down if we did not try for the rest of our lives to do something, however humble, for our fellow men”. In particular, they should prioritize Margaret’s future: “I saw very clearly that her sweet young life must be preserved and that our small family life must be rebuilt around her”. Again, he reflects that: “That undoubtedly was what Ian would have wished”. In a sense, their approach did, therefore, revolve around making ‘meaningful connections’, in ways similar to those described by Kessler.

Giving practical reality to what was imagined to be the wishes of the deceased formed a key plank of Alex and Susan’s approach and, it appears, that of many other families (although, of course, people’s reactions to trauma differ). Not only should they bear their grief with silent courage, as the dead sons would have wanted, but they should also rebuild in a manner that would respect their wishes. Their sons’ ‘sacrifice’ necessitated the creation of something that could be seen to have been worth fighting for.

This impetus was not only felt at an individual level, but also at a societal level. As Hirschberger has written (Hirschberger 2018), when people are confronted with mass death and with their inability to do much about it, they search for meaning and find comfort in the group—a collective symbolic structure that “satisfies the basic elements of meaning and identity—values, efficacy, purpose and worth”.

In Britain, for example, a sense of social solidarity, growing state intervention, and a collective desire for change and for post-War reconstruction developed during the War. Reflecting this mood, in 1942 the Beveridge Report was published, outlining plans for a cradle-to-grave welfare state in Britain, built around the establishment of free secondary education, the National Health Service, and the nationalisation of key industries (Timmins 2001). Beveridge's scheme, the key principles of which were implemented by the Labour Government after the War (Bew 2016), aimed to abolish 'five giants': Want, squalor, ignorance, idleness, and disease. Alex makes specific reference to working a few years more so that Susan and Margaret "will enjoy freedom from want in the future", and it seems likely he was consciously referencing Beveridge here.

Having said this, Alex's memoir ends on a despondent note: "when I think of what is happening in the world today, of the difficulties with Russia, of all the troubles, it makes me wonder if the sacrifice of so many magnificent young lives was to any purpose. When I think of the atomic bomb, I shudder! What is going to be the end of it all?" Although the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was widely supported at the time within the US and the UK, and felt to have shortened the War, the gloom Alex felt subsequently was shared by many who were terrified by the threat of potential mass extinction. Against the background of the threat of nuclear annihilation, focusing on individual sorrows could again seem self-indulgent, and the obligation to remain silent about wartime deaths was reinforced.

14. Conclusions: Some Personal and Public Reflections

Even though we never met, my grandfather's memoir of his son (my uncle) has provided a means for me to build an understanding of who they were, of the relationship between them, and, in Lambert's useful phrase, to 'connect through time' with them. Through the memoir, their stories resonate down through family history and still 'live' today; the portrait on the wall which hangs in the family home is no longer just a portrait of a boy with a family resemblance, but that of my uncle, vividly recalled by his father's account. As a child, I was aware of his death in the War, and that it was a significant event in my mother's—and our family's—life. The full story, though, remained largely submerged, until unearthed by my brother's transcribing of our grandfather's memoir in 2017, which the interview I conducted with our mother in 2006 helped to contextualise.

This individual 're-connection' is personal justification enough for writing this article. However, setting this rich account within its social and historical context also provides layered insights into other important themes: Memoir, masculinity, and subjectivity; gender and grieving; connections with 'home'; and constructing meaning after trauma. Above all, the memoir provides a touching account of one man's fathering, reflecting in the pre-War years his growing intimacy and close contact with his son, then the agonising pain of distance, separation, and loss through the War and beyond. In describing this emotional journey, it casts doubt on stereotypes of inexpressive authoritarian fatherhood, which are often readily ascribed to fathers at this time. Although written for private reasons, the memoir, therefore, has wider public significance in contributing to understanding of the complex psychological, social, and cultural history of fatherhood.

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